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SUBJECT: ELECTION SNAPSHOT: ROYAL AND SARKOZY UNCERTAIN HOW
TO COUNTER BAYROU, AS LE PEN HANGS IN THERE

REF: EMBASSY PARIS DAILY SIPRNET REPORT FOR MARCH 15

AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Asked to predict the result of the first round of the French presidential election now five weeks away, President Chirac is reported to have facetiously replied, "I see Sarkozy, Royal, Bayrou and Le Pen each getting 20 percent of the vote." In the most reputable polls there remains more than a ten point spread between Sarkozy, still the leader at above 25 percent of first round voter intentions, and Le Pen, at below 15 percent. Nevertheless there is a very rough accuracy to the presidential anecdote's suggestion of convergence among the top four contenders. A key Bayrou staffer told us March 14 that some polls to be published over the weekend of March 17 - 18 will show Bayrou coming in ahead of Royal in first round voter intentions. That development would further boost surging "Bayroumania," and add to the drumbeat of complaints that the polls are literally making the news, as coverage of changes in the polls creates credibility for options (like Bayrou, or before him, Royal) that the public had little regard for until changing poll numbers, and attendant media coverage, snowballed these candidates into contenders of the first rank. Both Sarkozy and Royal, still the leaders -- but more precariously so -- are struggling for the right strategies to undermine Bayrou, and prevent him from upsetting their long-projected plans for a Sarkozy-versus-Royal second-round face-off. Royal's candidacy is in more trouble than Sarkozy's, as she -- so far -- continues to fail to convince a significant portion of left-leaning voters that she has what it takes to be president of France. End Summary.

GRAIN OF TRUTH IN CHIRAC'S EXAGGERATION

2. (C) Notwithstanding Chirac's all-four-tied exaggeration for comic effect, current polls of voter intentions do reflect a trend towards convergence in the poll numbers of the "big four" -- Interior Minister and President of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party Nicolas Sarkozy, Poitou-Charentes region president and Socialist Party (PS) nominee Segolene Royal, president of the centrist Union for French Democracy (UDF) party Francois Bayrou, and the leader of the extremist, right-wing National Front (FN) Jean-Marie Le Pen. (The scrutiny given to all presidential remarks prompted comments that Chirac was not entirely joking -- he was also expressing the wish that Sarkozy do worse than

Chirac did in the first-round of the 2002 election and that Le Pen, with Chirac this time not in the race, do better.)

13. (C) As the April 22 first-round vote draws nearer, the trend in all polls has been that the first-round voter intentions of Sarkozy and Royal have been heading downwards -- from the 30 to 35 percent range to the 25 to 30 percent range, as the first-round voter intentions of Bayrou and Le Pen have trended upwards, slightly in the case of Le Pen and markedly so in the case of Bayrou. For example, in the well-respected, consistently conducted polling of the IPSOS opinion research firm, since January, the twenty point spread that separated, the leader, Sarkozy, from Bayrou (with Royal in-between) narrowed to a spread of under five points, with Le Pen moving slightly upwards to within the 10 to 15 percent range. Specifically, in IPSOS' March 14 iteration of its poll of first-round voter intentions, Sarkozy led with 28 percent, followed by Royal with 25 percent, with Bayrou on Royal's heels at 24 percent, and Le Pen trailing at 13 percent.

CONVERSION TO "BAYROUMANIA" CONTINUING

14. (C) Bruno Erhard, Bayrou's principal assistant for international affairs, promised PolOff on March 14 that, "Polls to be released over the weekend will show us ahead of Royal." This may well turn out to be true, as Bayrou and "Bayroumania" continue to dominate the front-pages of dailies and the covers of news weeklies, even though one poll released March 15 (by the CSA polling firm) shows Bayrou's first round voter intentions falling slightly (to 21 percent) and Sarkozy and Royal's rising slightly (to 27 and 26 percent, respectively).

15. (C) However his destiny may play out during coming weeks,

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Bayrou -- the newest anti-establishment alternative on the political scene -- has clearly tapped into the deep dissatisfaction among the French with the country's political class, its left/right partisanship and the lack of results from past governments of both left and right. Bayrou's campaign appearances have been drawing enthusiastic, overflow crowds, far beyond what the conventional wisdom expected for the UDF, given its progressive marginalization by the UMP since 2002. One example from opinion polling that attests to Bayrou's new-found credibility as a presidential contender is that, for the first time in the ten-year history of this monthly poll, Bayrou in March 2007 comes out at the top of the IPSOS firm's "Presidential potential" survey.

UMP AND PS UNSURE HOW TO COUNTER BAYROU

16. (C) Both the Sarkozy and Royal campaigns remain hesitant to tackle Bayrou head-on, lest this make him their principal competitor and boost his standing in the eyes of a restive electorate as a credible challenger of the Paris-based establishment, the media, and the "left/right system." Indications from both the Royal and Sarkozy campaigns are that both organizations are hoping mightily that the current infatuation of voters with Bayrou will pass as quickly as it came. To support their wishful thinking, strategists from both camps point to the way opinion surveys show that those who say they are going to vote for Bayrou are "uncertain of their choice" by margins approaching double that of those who say they plan to vote for Sarkozy or Royal.

17. (C) The sense that their electorate is firming up and will hold through both rounds of the upcoming election is particularly marked in the Sarkozy camp. As Culture Minister (and Sarkozy supporter) Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres told the Ambassador over lunch on March 14, "Our base is strongly anchored; judging from enthusiasm at campaign events and the results of internal polling, we sense that support for Sarkozy is solidifying and expanding, and we have no doubt that we're going to be in the second round -- we just don't

know against whom."

¶8. (C) Donnedieu de Vabres added, "So I can tell you for sure that Segolene Royal will not be President of France." Donnedieu de Vabres believes (a conviction shared by UMP Secretary General Pierre Mehaignerie (ref)), as current

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polling results and the conventional wisdom of the political commentariat also suggest, that Sarkozy would face a much more difficult challenge from Bayrou than from Royal in a second-round showdown. In the latest IPSOS poll, Sarkozy would beat Royal if the "second round were held next Sunday" by a margin of 53 to 47 percent. The assumption among most analysts, borne out by current polling results, is that in a Sarkozy-Bayrou second round, Bayrou would benefit from a ground swell of "Stop Sarkozy" sentiment, taking all the votes of the left and enough in the center to win handily.

¶9. (C) So far, both PS and UMP spokespersons have limited their criticisms of Bayrou to pointing out the difficulties Bayrou would face putting together a parliamentary coalition that could govern effectively. Commentators on talk shows and in the press claim that they detect that this theme is "sinking in" with the public, and raising questions about the realism of Bayrou's proposed "union of both left and right."

¶10. (C) Many in the PS are facing up to growing indications that, so far, Royal's candidacy is not succeeding in inspiring confidence among many who would otherwise be "naturally" rallying to her as the candidate of the center-left. Royal has not clearly established, across the board among the left-leaning electorate, that she has what it takes to be the President. The widely shared consensus among political observers is that unless Royal begins now to turn the tide of skepticism on the left about her overall competence for the presidency, she will be certainly beaten by Sarkozy, if she is not eliminated by Bayrou first.

¶11. (C) Royal herself, is reportedly serenely indifferent to the panic running through her party at the prospect that her candidacy may, right now, be teetering into an unstoppable downward slide. Roland Cayrol, the head of the CSA polling firm, at a meeting March 12 told PolOff the following story: "My son sees Segolene every day. He's in charge of making the videos that appear on her website. He tells me that he has never seen someone so imperturbably self-confident. He

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says, 'It's as if she's carried by a sense of her own destiny.'" COMMENT: Coming weeks will make starkly clear if Royal's self-confidence is delusional, or if the force of the political cunning and exquisite sense of timing that took her from nowhere to contender are still with her. END COMMENT.) Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

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